Black Spatial Affordances and the Residential Ecologies of the Great Migration

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**ABSTRACT:** Affordance theory, originating in ecological psychology but adopted by the field of design studies, refers to possibilities for action that a subject perceives in an environment. I posit Black spatial affordance, critically employing affordances with an eye toward Black ecological and geographical practices, and I apply it to the Great Migration residential landscape and literature. Grounded in racial capitalist critique, Black geographic thought, and cultural critique at the intersections of race, place, and performance, Black spatial affordance works as an analytic to engage Black quotidian practice in racially circumscribed and delineated places and spaces. Operating at multiple scales, Black spatial affordance engages the specificity of places structured by racism to analyze the micro-level spatial negotiations Black subjects devise and employ in recognition of the terrain through which they move or are emplaced. Employing Black spatial affordance enables critical inquiry into the spatial navigation of subjects who occupy marginal positions in society.

**KEYWORDS:** everyday practice, environmental racism, Great Migration, housing, human ecology, residential segregation, urban

In 1970, Nathan Hare termed the ongoing relationship Black people in the United States have with the environment and their investments in the maintenance thereof as Black ecology. He highlighted the focus on white recreational space present in the ecological movement of his era and decried the lack of substantive consideration of the factors contributing to Black people’s distinctive and significant obstacles to safe and healthy residential environments. Hare cited racial residential discrimination, higher instances of polluted air contributing to worse health outcomes (including a prevalence of respiratory disorders and shorter life expectancy), and moreover a lack of adequate recreational space (where leisure might safely transpire) as a part of the everyday environment Black people in the US, and especially in cities, navigate (Hare 1970). This Black ecology identified by Hare explicitly named a conversation that had been ongoing in Black communities for decades, dating back at least to W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Philadelphia Negro* ([1899] 2007). Not only have Black communities’ “eco-critical consciousness” been traced in the historical record (Young and Subramaniam 2017), but also their interactions with and within their environments, particularly their residential environments, have sustained a wide array of representation in scholarly studies and creative texts. The archive of reportage and representation available enables a culling of Black performative and relational practices toward the end of more closely engaging the nuanced and quotidian negotiations of limits and possibilities by Black urban dwellers.
The Uses of Ecology in the Study of Urban Racial Dynamics

The use of ecology as a framework for understanding social dynamics in cities was introduced formally and to much acclaim by the Chicago School of sociologists in the first half of the twentieth century. The edited collection *The City* (1925), published by Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and Roderick McKenzie, laid the groundwork for modern urban theory, as they used the specificities of the city of Chicago’s population dynamics to make large claims about ethnic and racial patterns of behavior, interaction, and settlement in locales. Robert Park laid out an approach to the study of society based on ecology, or the relations between organisms and their environment, which was echoed and extended by Roderick McKenzie who detailed the School’s use of natural zones and “invasion” to understand neighborhood dynamics of population settlement, demographic shifts, and social behavior resulting therefrom. Borrowing from plant biology’s concept of ecological succession, the Chicago School represented patterns of human settlement in the modern city through waves of initial settlement, displacement through succession or “invasion” of another settlement group, and then resettlement further outward from the location of initial settlement, which was also further outward from the city center. Each population group succeeded a residential predecessor in one of the identified ecological zones. Burgess’s concentric circle model of city growth and expansion mapped racial and socioeconomic groups onto the abstracted geography of the city. Intergroup conflict and tension, caused by seemingly irreconcilable differences such as race and ethnic cultural practices and rapid increase in immigration to the locale (according to the Chicago School), contributed substantially to each group’s movement into various zones of the city from the central business district outward to the commuters’ zone or suburbs.

The Black population, segregated as it was and constrained residentially to the Black Belt, received its own unique graphic representation through a thick Black band spanning across the circle’s layers, radiating from the “transitional zone” of slum, vice, and rooming houses outward to the “residential zone” of apartment houses (Park et al. 1925: 55). The Black population in particular would be held up by Burgess and Black protégé E. Franklin Frazier as exemplar and catalyst of social disorganization, which was also used in part to explain Black socioeconomic (im)mobility (1925; Frazier 1932).

Roderick Ferguson (2004) critiques the Chicago School and New Deal-era social reformers’ fixity on heteropatriarchal household compositions as standards of social organization and markers of modern citizenship (or possibilities of ascension thereto). The perceived queerness of Black households in the 1930s and 1940s—comprised as they were of parts or multiples of what would be considered nuclear families with many of them headed by women—threw Black migrant morality into question, as notions of rightful domestic order and “responsible intimacy” among household members were not readily ascertainable (Ferguson 2004: 36–38). Other scholars have noted the holes in the concentric circle model of modern urban settlement, particularly the inaccuracies of representing changing residential patterns in the city as natural rather than the product of de facto and de jure discrimination, as well as the role of national racial anxiety and Black populations and informants themselves in the construction of the Chicago School’s theories and methods (Baldwin 2004; Loughran 2015).

Moreover, many years before the establishment of the Chicago School, W. E. B. Du Bois refined his sociological methods through his Atlanta Sociological Laboratory and his research for and publication of *The Philadelphia Negro*, the first published sociological study centered on a local Black population. Delving into the statistical details of Black urban life through maps, graphs, and tables, Du Bois mapped the contours of Philadelphia’s Seventh Ward and the factors of racism, poverty, employment and educational opportunity, social institutions, and living...
conditions that contributed to the “Philadelphia Negro’s” challenges and triumphs in adjusting to urban life. Du Bois’s study acknowledged that Black people’s urban environment was not passively structured such that agency alone would enable their experiences and opportunities to line up with those of other population groups. The Philadelphia Negro, although not heralded by other early field-shaping sociologists or by the discipline at large until more recently, established a groundwork for study of the particularities of Black urban experiences and the active, race-based exclusion present in the city environment at the turn of the century (Ferguson 2004; Loughran 2015). Had these scholars taken seriously Du Bois’s pathbreaking work, the model of natural ecological succession employed by Chicago School sociologists may have been more critical of the supposed naturalness of factors in neighborhood settlement and change that they were suggesting (Loughran 2015).

With the unnuanced and arguably misplaced importation of biological succession into social study, human ecology in the modern period (roughly 1930s–1950s) gets a bad rap, especially as it relates to race. This may contribute to a dearth of ecological analysis and study (in the way of formal scholarship) on the Jim Crow era, the period marked by widespread, inventive, and virulent racial segregation. However, the unproblematised use of ecology during this period, with the concept of “natural zones” of population settlement in urban neighborhoods and migrant “invasion,” should not preclude it from ecological study at the very same intersections of race, residential geography, and social and embodied practice.

Ecologies are in many ways centered around the ordinary and the everyday. To access a wider array of the everyday knowledges and practices of Black historical subjects, analytical frameworks that help us to hone in on the banal, the taken-for-granted, and the glossed-over mundane practices and tactics Black people have devised are key. To dig deeper into Black historical practices in and with space, we might ask: what ecological affordances have Black people perceived and utilized, and what practices have they devised and implemented in their environments structured by racial capitalism broadly, and antiblack residential discrimination particularly? What tools and methodologies allow us to recuperate these practices from the historical remnants in the traditional archive as well as in the built environment? I propose a framework that captures and builds on the critical work of scholars of Black place, performance, and being that slows down and hones in on Black ecological tactics and that offers tools for recovering the same. This article delineates how bringing together threads of scholarship in Black ontology, geography, history, and performance with those of ecology, design, and literature may produce a useful analytic for engaging not only the quotidian life of modern-period Black urban dwellers, but also for other Black historical subjects navigating the urban built environment. I offer Black spatial affordance as an analytic for engaging everyday Black practice in space and place, and I apply it to the ecological context of Chicago’s Great Migration-era kitchenette apartments through analysis of Frank London Brown’s autobiographical novel Trumbull Park ([1959] 2005).

**Black Being in a Climate of Antiblackness:**

**On Expanding Environmental Theory**

Reports of Black experience in the city across more than a century, to include Du Bois’s The Philadelphia Negro ([1899] 2007), the 1922 Chicago Commission on Race Relations’ The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Riot, and Hare’s own “Black Ecology” (1970), document antiblack violence and discrimination—such as police and citizen brutality and inequality in employment, educational, and residential opportunities—as primary factors constituting the environment and negatively impacting Black people in urban places. Variations of “know-your-
place aggression,” as scholar Koritha Mitchell (2020: 2) has deemed it, have been targeted at Black individuals and communities across time and place, and have been particularly conspicuous in public arenas and spectacular events. The familiar and unsurprising (given histories of racism) yet regularly disruptive and disturbing occurrences of spectacular and subtle racial aggression have contributed to a “Black sense of place” (McKittrick 2011), encompassing the violence of antiblackness in structuring human geographies yet engaging it as one point of departure rather than an endpoint in discussing Black life, history, experience. The quotidian aspects of this racial climate might be understood within what scholar Christina Sharpe has referred to as “the weather,” or “the totality of our environments” (2016: 106). She asserts, “The weather is the total climate; and that climate is anti-black. . . . The weather necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies” (2016: 106). It is not only events of spectacular and subtle racial aggression, but also the societal structures and hegemonic practices that are both legacies and recapitulations of national, foundational antiblackness that make up the weather to which Sharpe gives name.

Quotidian violences, such as the microaggressions highlighted in writer Claudia Rankine's mixed media text *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), and those unspectacular and mundane atrocities in enslavement and after emancipation (via self-manumission or otherwise), compellingly analyzed by the scholarly works of Saidiya Hartman (1997) and others, are sometimes too easily overlooked, glossed over, or lumped into categories that do not acknowledge the range, depth, or details of their impact due to either their unspectacular nature or their embeddedness into the fabric of everyday life, if not both. Indeed, the unspoken question of “How does it feel to be a problem?” that Du Bois (1903) reads between the lines of strangers’ comments and the targeted racialized hailing Fanon ([1952] 2008) experiences on the train platform by way of a child’s cry of “Look, a Negro!” exist as theoretical precursors to these same everyday phenomena highlighted by scholars in the contemporary era. Engagement with the mundane, the banal, the everyday offers insight into the consistencies and vagaries of “the weather” through which Black people traverse and in which they exist. Black individual and collective experiences, taken as a lens into the operation of the structures of antiblackness and racial capitalism at play, bring us closer to how Black people maneuver in the weather’s elements.

### Racial Capitalism and Black Geographical and Ecological Thought

Understanding the work of antiblackness in the domain of capitalism productively expands into an engagement with racial capitalism as “the weather” or “total environment” of US place-based racism. Cedric Robinson, in his landmark tome *Black Marxism* ([1983] 2000), established that capitalism fundamentally operates from a racial logic, and other scholars have since built on his framework to draw out the intricacies of globalized Western ideology and practice. Lisa Lowe offers: "Racial capitalism captures the sense that actually existing capitalism exploits through culturally and socially constructed differences such as race, gender, region and nationality and is lived through those uneven formations" (2015: 149–150). Racial capitalist logics produce, and are constituted through, a reification of Eurocentrist, patriarchal, heterosexist value hierarchies that construct and justify the accumulated material and social capital of whiteness as supreme and that render blackness as disposable, valuable only for labor and resource extraction (e.g., Gilmore 2007; McKittrick and Woods 2007). Racial capitalism collects the check of extracted capital from those rendered most vulnerable through its own logics and operation and bequeaths it, with compounded interest, to those rendered most valuable. Racial capitalism asserts itself materially in space and place, discursively in the construction of narratives, and socially in indi-
individual and institutional interactions. Racial capitalism is evident in “the spatial fix” of the US prison system, the persisting “plantation bloc” of the Mississippi Delta region, and the politics of racial disposability and surplus operating in places like Flint, Michigan (Gilmore 2007; Pulido 2016; Woods 1998; see also Giroux 2006). As George Lipsitz has contended and other scholars have shown, “The racial projects of U.S. society have always been spatial projects as well” (2011: 52).

Geographers Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods (2007) have argued that Black people’s production of space and spatial knowledges within the confines of racist society—what they call “Black geographies”—are under-acknowledged and underexplored. Rather than being primarily or solely victims of oppressive spatial power formations, Black subjects produce space and possess alternative knowledges of geography in light of spatial power hierarchies (McKittrick and Woods 2007). Renewed attention to caretaking and insurgent ecologies from the context of enslavement (and rebellion to/fugitivity from it) are instructive in their elucidation of long-standing Black relational practices among each other, other entities, and with their physical space and environment (Benjamin Golden 2021; McKittrick 2013; Wynter 1971).6

Understanding Black being in cities is to recognize expanded understandings of what might constitute environmental and urban ecological theory. Recent analyses of urban environmental racism have encompassed proximity to toxic dumping sites, precarious positioning in the face of severe weather events and “natural” disaster, health disparities, resource extraction, and the lived and vicarious trauma of spectacular and subtle antiblack racist events (Brown and Smith 2016; Giroux 2006; McKittrick and Woods 2007; Pulido 2016; Purifoy and Seamster 2021; Seamster and Purifoy 2021; Taylor 2014; Wright 2018). Attending to Black urban experiences and practices in the face of these threats to the health, safety, and security of their persons and environments enables expansions and creations of environmental and ecological theory that help us to not only more effectively engage Black life and historical practice but also to better understand city environments and the study thereof as profoundly shaped by and in response to Black being (Hunter and Robinson 2018; Summers 2019).

**Black in the City: Ecologies of the Great Migration**

The Great Migration saw tens of thousands of Black sojourners “pick up [their] li[v]e[s]” from the rural and agricultural South and “put [them] down” (in the words of Langston Hughes (1949: 61)) in northern, Midwestern, and western urban locales between the 1910s and 1970. Eight metropolitan areas, including Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York, were home to two-thirds of the southern-born US Black populace living outside of the South by 1940 (Gregory 2005). Migrants brought their knowledge of the soil, of social and racial relations, of economics (and experiences of exploitation), family dynamics, and their own personal ambitions and adapted them to their new urban environments (Gregory 2005; Grossman 1989; Wilkerson 2010). They shaped their new cities, and their cities shaped them.

The interactions among Black people and their social and built urban environments were captured in limited form in the early to mid-twentieth century by social documentarians for the purposes of reportage, policing, and reform. Girls and young women migrating to cities navigated moralistic agendas and reductive gendered and raced conceptions imposed on them, penalizing them for anticipated or alleged waywardness and constraining or quashing their expressions of a self-defined freedom (Chatelain 2015; Hartman 2019). In their capturing of these subjects, social reformers and sociologists, among others, framed Black urban dwellers as pathological, maladjusted, and a threat to the order of the modern, increasingly refined and
defined, city. This reportage continued through the rise of sociology as a legitimate and respected field of research, such as in Park, Burgess, and McKenzie’s *The City* (1925), as noted above.

As more and more Black people migrated to urban centers, Black artists made and benefitted from expanded opportunities to frame themselves. Places like Harlem and Chicago became Black meccas in their own rights and cultural and artistic renaissances bloomed. Black literature, visual art, theater, and music exploded into wider and wider geographic and demographic audiences and conveyed the contours of Black life, pleasure, trial, and ambition to the world. Writers like Gwendolyn Brooks (1945, 1949, [1953] 1992, 1960, 1968), Langston Hughes (1926, 1930, 1949), Ann Petry (1946), Richard Wright ([1940] 2008, 1941, 1945), Ralph Ellison (1952), and Lorraine Hansberry ([1959] 1994) captured the ecological dimensions of Black migrants’ encounters with and endurances through these cities by way of representing familial, platonic, and romantic relations, neighborhood composition, housing conditions, policing, and social congregation, among other elements. The desires, motivations, fears, and dreams of Black subjects—as well as the environments of which they were a part—were central to those stories, rather than blanket themes of pathology. The close-up perspectives of the urban domain, although fictionalized in most accounts, offer unparalleled archives of expression, sensation, and experience of being Black in the Great Migration city, as will be demonstrated in the latter section of this article (Bone and Courage 2011; Hine and McCluskey, Jr. 2012; Olson 2017; Schlabach 2013).

So voluminous was their migrant tide, and so stringent the racism awaiting them, that Black migrants’ presence incited enactments of housing policy and practice—in the form of redlining, restrictive covenants, predatory contracts, individual and mob violence, and exploitative pricing—that shaped neighborhoods in ways that continued to affect communities generations later and into the present day (Clark 1965; Coates 2014; Duneier 2016; Hirsch 1983; Rothstein 2017; Taylor 2019; Weaver 1948). Negotiating this new terrain resulted in the adaptation and creation of practices for how to relate to themselves, each other, their social environs, and their built and natural environments.

By 1945, social science made large strides when Black sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton published their landmark two-part tome *Black Metropolis* examining Black life in mid-twentieth-century Chicago in a manner that diverged from the earlier Chicago School. Using a primarily ethnographic approach, the two did not study Chicago’s Black Belt—or Bronzeville as it was fondly named by its residents—from a place of pathologization but rather of humanization, supplanting the earlier Chicago studies with one more aligned with Du Bois’s analysis and recognized the unnaturalness of racial segregation and discrimination as well as the active structuring of the urban environment. Drake and Cayton identified five “axes of life” in Bronzeville: staying alive, having a good time, praising God, getting ahead, and advancing the race (Drake and Cayton [1945] 1962). The collaboration among community members in many instances, such as the sharing and exchange of cookware and services, was produced by structured circumstances of proximity in Black Belt buildings; however, it also showcased the variety of solutions Black residents devised within the limited structural possibilities of their environment (Drake and Cayton [1945] 1962: 572).

### Black Spatial Affordances

Scholars have discussed fixity and mobility, Black people firmly associated with place or fixed-in-place and simultaneously rendered placeless or associated with placelessness (Alvilez 2008; Baker 1991; Schlabach 2013). There have been discussions on homemaking under restricted,
imperiled, and unhome-like living conditions, focusing on the period of US (plantation) slavery, public housing, suburbia, and prisons (Gilmore 2007; Hirsch 1983; hooks 1990; Taylor 2019). Black creativity (often despite the odds), Black resistance (in the face of terror and impossible choices), and Black perseverance tend to figure prominently in scholarship, but there has generally been much less attention on Black endurance of circumstance in an unspectacular, unheroic way, in a way that is less about resisting the system and more about living an everyday life as a person with needs and wants and faults and failures and triumphs (for notable exceptions see especially Alexander 2004; Hartman 2019; Quashie 2012). There also has not been much discussion of the decision/choice plane preceding the acts that might bring us closer to quotidian negotiation of the “weather” in places deemed placeless that were, despite that, home for many, like the Chicago Black Belt’s kitchenette building.¹⁰

Affordance theory, adopted by the field of design, offers a productive framework for addressing this analytical lacuna. Ecological psychologist James J. Gibson first theorized affordance in the following manner: “The affordances of the environment are what it offers the [subject], what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill” ([1979] 2015: 119, original emphasis). In other words, the environment of a subject affords possibilities for action and interaction.¹¹ Beyond the field of ecological psychology, affordance theory has been heavily taken up by design theorists and practitioners, who have used it to think through and improve product and spatial design for consumers, defining affordances as “opportunities for behaviour, or more specifically, opportunities for action,” and, succinctly, “action possibilities” (Hadavi et al. 2015; Maier et al. 2009; Norman 1990; Pols 2012; Withagen et al. 2012; You and Chen 2007). Affordances might refer to the action possibilities perceived in, provoked by, or created in a circumstance within a space. The situation might prompt or require creativity that is carried out in place/space, or the space itself might provoke or necessitate unspectacular endurance (such as in a home space) in order to maneuver through it on a day-to-day basis. In sum, the essence of affordance theory lies in object or spatial utility and possibility. Design theory, when brought to bear on Black spatial experience, amplifies the opportunities and constraints for Black subjects in their social and built environments as they navigate space and place.

I posit Black spatial affordance as a critical expansion of affordance theory toward the end of parsing out the material macro- and micro-level constructions, deployments, and negotiations of, and constrictions imposed on, blackness. Here I take as granted that blackness, as a concept and condition, is mapped onto both bodies and geographies (Du Bois 1903; Fanon [1952] 2008; McKittrick 2006). Black spatial affordances are grounded in Black lived experiences in space and the built environment and encompass the particularities of the relations to space that the possibilities within limitations engender. I argue that when racial discrimination manifests in built environments, subjects perceive and utilize affordances both out of necessity and with creativity. Following Robin Bernstein’s work on “scriptive things” where in the reading of archival artifacts, “things” not only “prompt[ing] meaningful bodily behaviors” but also expose common or socialized forms of interacting with the things that ultimately guide the interaction, we might understand space as similarly scriptive (but not necessarily environmentally determinant) with common possibilities and performances attached or inscribed (2011: 71–72). Following this, spatial affordances are the perceived and created or innovated possibilities amid constraint. Black spatial affordances are those particularly informed by constraints in space born out of a locus of orientation toward blackness—to include investments in antiblackness. As a theory, Black spatial affordance extends affordance theory to refer to the coexistence of limited and expansive opportunities for action and performance within racially circumscribed space—that is, space that has been demarcated racially, either explicitly or implicitly.¹² Black spatial affordance builds on design studies’ use of affordance, marrying it to the social, cultural, and histor-
ical situatedness offered by Pierre Bourdieu’s *habitus*, and centering a racial analytic offered by scholars of Black performance and Black geographies.

Habitus is an analytic to engage social, embodied history. An interplay between past and present conditions and the practices produced therefrom, habitus locates embodied behavior in the historical conditions structuring it (Bourdieu 1990: 56). The “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” that make up habitus operate such that the past exists within the present context of behaviors and decision-making, making historical precedent and social custom large influencers of present and future action of an individual or institution (Bourdieu 1990: 53). If racial ideology manifests in space and place such that certain racialized bodies—to include physical, cultural, historical, and epistemological bodies—are included and normalized in spaces while others are excluded (actively and passively), then racial ideology is an iteration of habitus in social and geographic space.

Moreover, Harvey Young identifies a “black habitus,” namely, the social expectations that an individual takes on and incorporates into self and then projects onto society and others that is informed by a critical collective memory of treatment as an abstracted, anonymized, or misrecognized Black body (2010: 20). What Bourdieu fails to consider in his formulation of habitus, and what Young signals in his reformulation of black habitus, is that not all environments, in their structuring, impact subjects comparably, and thus the habits and habitus are necessarily distinct. That is to say, “the weather” of antiblackness, to invoke Sharpe again, is part and parcel of the “structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” that define habitus, and as Sharpe avers, this weather “produces new ecologies” (2016: 106). For Black subjects, their orientation in space is informed, but not wholly determined, by conceptions of how the space has been constructed through power and race (what can be understood as what Katherine McKittrick (2011) deems a “Black sense of place”), how society projects blackness and its attendant meanings onto their person, and how their actions might therefore be construed by society.13 The possibilities perceived in light—and in spite—of these orientations are Black spatial affordances.

Black spatial affordance, then, engages the affordances of space with a critical eye toward the histories and realities of hegemonic social, and coercive institutional, practices that create and circumscribe racialized space. Black spatial affordances are those aspects or conditions of racially circumscribed space that necessitate, invite, or provoke particular spatial practices. In *Demonic Grounds*, Katherine McKittrick states that Black geographies have the capacity to reveal “the limitations and possibilities of traditional spatial arrangements through the ways the Black subject is produced by, and is producing, geographic knowledges” (2006: 6–7). Thus, Black geographies can reveal Black spatial affordances. Black spatial affordances are those coexisting limits and possibilities that Black subjects seize hold of in their practices of negotiating Black geographies and other racially circumscribed terrain. Affordances are not the practices performed by Black subjects, but rather they are the physical/corporeal, material, and social constraints and opportunities for action, intervention, or innovation in spaces that Black subjects, with their geographic knowledges, perceive and with which they engage. In this way, Black spatial affordance theory enables critical inquiry into the spatial navigation of subjects who occupy marginal positions in society.

Black spatial affordance is most applicable to and expedient for analysis of material space and power relations. It facilitates honing in specifically on the co-constituting realities of possibility and constraint in the experience of place and space by Black subjects. It asks the questions: What couldn’t happen? What might’ve happened? How does that weigh on what did happen? All of these questions are attuned particularly to experience and embodied practice of/in place (e.g., a block or home in the Black Belt, a retail store, an alley, a sidewalk). To access Black spatial affordances when engaging historical and contemporary environments, one might consider:
what might a space yield and what does it require of its subjects? What solutions do Black subjects devise in spaces they inhabit, in spaces in which they have varying degrees of control or authority? Black spatial affordance considers orientation toward space and social encounter that is steeped in historical interlocking power and space relations that may or may not be explicit or sought out in any given moment by any given Black subject but may definitely be perceived or planned for. It is not an overdetermination of other people's actions or possibilities within a space, place, or situation. Rather, it is a drawing-on of community wisdom and personal experience/knowledge that something could happen or has happened, therefore, acting as if it could not, has not, or will not is hazardous.

**Black Spatial Affordances in the Black Belt Kitchenette**

Nathan Hare, when detailing what he coined as “Black ecology,” noted: “The very housing afforded blacks is polluted” (1970: 5). Housing is one evident dimension of capitalism's exploitation through uneven formations—a racialized spatial project. It is therefore also a consequential site for exploring Black ecological practices and alternative ways of relating to people, nature, society, the built environment, and capital. Examining affordances in Chicago's Black Belt kitchenettes exposes the disparities built into residents' home environments and the realm of possibilities and actions born of these domestic terrains. The kitchenette of the mid-twentieth century brings together rural and urban Black ecologies into one habitation. Kitchenette apartments, in which innumerable migrants to places like Chicago settled and made their transient and permanent homes, can be understood—quite literally—as what McKittrick (2013) calls a “plantation future”: populations migrated from sharecropping arrangements on plantations in the South to kitchenettes in the urban North whose landlords oft en exploited Black migrants to the extent that necessitated doubling up in single housing units to cover expenses for a property unowned and ill-equipped.14 Drake and Cayton described kitchenettes in this way: “Bronzeville's kitchenettes are single rooms, rented furnished and without a lease. Sometimes a hot-plate is included for cooking, but often there are no cooking facilities despite the name. Hundreds of large apartment buildings have been cut up into kitchenettes to meet the chronic housing shortage in the Black Belt” ([1945] 1962: 573).

The kitchenette’s built environment and neglect by landlords and city services created burdensome and hazardous conditions that residents navigated daily (Morrison 2022). While the apartments were decried as moral hazards for inhabitants and the surrounding communities by social reformers and journalists due to their overcrowding and intimacies, they posed real, material hazards for those residing in them (Ferguson 2004; Shabazz 2015). As I have written elsewhere, the spatial configuration of Chicago's Black Belt kitchenettes was such that mundane tasks of getting dressed and accessing the bathroom required coordination and innovation (Morrison 2022). Kitchenette residents anticipated challenges and hazards that existed in their building’s structure and infrastructure, and when they did not or could not, their experiences and the stories of others shaped their interactions with future built environments, such as in Frank London Brown's *Trumbull Park*, to be discussed below. Kitchenette residents were also adept at recognizing opportunities for action—or spatial affordances—such as creating privacy where none existed and creating systems that ensured their own psychic and bodily integrity. Examples abound in the fictional and semi-autobiographical texts of the period by Black authors featuring life in Chicago’s kitchenettes; these artists inhabited or were in very close proximity to the habitations they depicted, and much of their representations help to fill in the gaps of what many of the sociological reports and archival data left out.
For instance, in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* ([1940] 2008), Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Maud Martha* (1953), Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* ([1959] 1994), and Frank London Brown’s *Trumbull Park* ([1959] 2005), characters encounter vermin in or immediately outside of their Chicago kitchenette buildings, and characters in each of these situations respond differently to the encroachment. Vermin, in the form of rats, mice, and roaches, commonly overran kitchenette buildings due to an abundance of refuse in hallways, stairwells, and alleyways. The refuse in these spaces was placed so as to not take up space in or befoul the confined quarters of the apartments; it was then left to heap up as the city often neglected service of the predominantly Black-inhabited areas (Shabazz 2015). Rats and roaches were not only nuisances but also sanitation and safety hazards: they carried diseases, spoiled sustenance, and on many occasions (in the case of rats) bit children. The limited space and resources of the kitchenette shaped its affordances, and residents chose various courses of action in response to their environment’s prompting. Literature—especially that of authors like Frank London Brown who were writing stories richly steeped in their own experiences in Chicago’s kitchenettes and public housing—brings audiences closer to the interior world of characters, particularly as it intersected with their exterior environments. Their desires, fears, hopes, self-contradictions, staunchly held beliefs, and inner psychic and emotional worlds are illuminated in ways that amplify the characters’ negotiations with their environments—and things like vermin—that may not come across as clearly or palpably in social scientific data.

**Black Spatial Affordances in Trumbull Park**

Frank London Brown’s autobiographical novel *Trumbull Park* ([1959] 2005) centers on the mob violence and hostility that Black families (including the author’s) endured in the struggle to integrate the government-funded Trumbull Park housing project in Chicago. While the titular and historical public housing project is the primary setting of the novel’s action, the Gardener Building—the kitchenette dwelling from which the protagonist’s family moves—is a linchpin in Brown’s narrative. The building prompts behaviors from its residents, informed by the affordances they perceive, that remain with them even after they are able to secure other types of home space. These actions deriving from the kitchenette’s affordances inscribe themselves into residents’ quotidian practices.

At one meeting of the collective formed by the bomb-ravaged Black families of the Trumbull Park Homes, a character is nonverbally questioned for his peculiar behavior. On departure from the Martin house, Terry’s coat is retrieved from the closet. When he is given the coat, he immediately shakes it and pats down the body and both sleeves. Others in the group pause, peering questioningly—and suspiciously—at him, wondering if he believes someone may have stolen something from his possessions. He looks up at the questioning eyes and begins to explain:

> You know, my wife and I went through college together. . . . Slept in dingy one- and two-room kitchenettes for almost three years. Once Nadine’s economics professor invited us to visit his home. We did, and when we were preparing to leave, the old guy, trying to be polite, held Nadine’s coat so that she could slip her arms into it. And, while I watched, I swear, not one but two big family-sized roaches crawled right out from under the collar of Nadine’s coat and galloped right across the back. ([1959] 2005: 177–178)

Noting that it was unclear if the professor noticed the scurrying creatures because he engaged them in conversation for fifteen minutes more, Terry claimed, “We thought we’d die. We both knew that those roaches had come from our dump of a room” ([1959] 2005: 178). The traveling...
evidence of their kitchenette residence breeds personal embarrassment and mortification on the part of the couple. The professor’s home is clearly spatially and socioeconomically removed from Terry and Nadine’s “dingy” kitchenette apartment, as the existence of the roaches in that space is framed as foreign and out of place. Further, the figure of the roach marks the young Black couple as outside of the realm of classed cleanliness of the professor’s home, associating them, to their horror, with an unclean home and potentially marking them “unclean” house guests. The roaches are rendered monstrosities, as they are described as “two big family-sized roaches” that “gallop,” with clear ability to trample underfoot any semblance of refinement—or even clean ordinariness—the couple may have desired to convey. The larger-than-life description of the vermin signal the immensity of feeling provoked by their unexpected, inconvenient, and disorienting appearance. When the couple departed the professor’s home, they “rushed to a street light” to inspect the garment “inside and out” for the seen—or any additional unseen—roaches but ultimately “couldn’t find a trace of them” after a fifteen-minute thorough investigation. “We knew we’d left them behind,” Terry concludes ([1959] 2005: 178).

While at the time of the recounting Terry and Nadine are residents in the new construction of the Trumbull Park housing project that is seen as a welcomed escape from their prior home, the kitchenette’s affordances follow them into their new domain, and the constrained range of action possibilities (and perception of the same) that arose from their kitchenette dwelling remain embedded in their routine practices. Terry states that although his wife spent the night crying about the professional nightmare,

> We laugh about it now. Yet and still, both of us shake and brush our coats whenever we put them on. At first we did it because we wanted to make sure that the ‘professor incident,’ as we called it, would never happen again. But as the years have gone by, it has become a fetish, a ritual, a compulsion. Now we’re trying to break the habit, and we can’t . . . . ([1959] 2005: 178)

The fear of being embarrassed again in a similar fashion breeds in the couple the compulsive behavior of giving their coats—and presumably other items that could also transport vermin—an investigatory once-over. The two are compelled to confirm and reconfirm their bodily integrity through routinized acts of sartorial inspection. What was once a conscious preventative mechanism has evolved into subconscious habit so strange as to invite the stares of others. That Terry also describes the behavior as “a fetish” and “a ritual” illuminates the couple’s investment in the embodied routine, even as it is compulsive and happens with a large degree of automation.

The experience of the public exposure of a private condition is mediated by Nadine’s coat. The coat, then, with its capacity to expose, becomes the symbol of differential socioeconomic status—and the attendant polarized narratives—between the couple and the professor. Terry’s narrative does not focus on the state or condition of the coat, nor on its age or material composition, but rather it centers on the emotions and enactments surrounding the whole ordeal. In other words, it is not a fraying collar, discolored print, or thinned material that are physical markers of the couple’s different class status. The coat itself is not described. Rather, it is only the roaches, and the kitchenette from whence they came, that make both the coat and the ritual into objects of discussion. The performative fixation conveys the couple’s vulnerability to home infestation and undesired material violation during and after their years of kitchenette living. This public-facing anxiety over the years has sublimated into routinized self-scrutiny as the couple has acted to distance themselves from assumptions that Black people are unhygienic or desperately poor, or that their living spaces are so by extension they are, too. The Black geography of the kitchenette—with its attendant vermin, degraded associations, and racial
assumptions—produces circumscribed action possibilities, and the actions born out of these affordances become a barely conscious quotidian practice.

In the Elements: A Conclusive Note

If the climate and weather of antiblackness and racial capitalism constitute the total environment of US society, then the elements of that weather are what Black people encounter, in familiar but changeable format, in everyday life. In mid-twentieth-century segregated Black Chicago, these elements included dense neighborhoods, dilapidated housing prone to fire and (infra) structural failures (e.g., collapsing stairs and balconies, cracked and leaking plumbing, sparse and overburdened electrical circuits), intrusive nonhuman beings (e.g., insects, rodents, stray cats and dogs), natural weather conditions intersecting with housing conditions (e.g., heat, cold, humidity, precipitation, wind), outsider traffic (e.g., police, social workers, documentary photographers), and insider traffic (a host of predominantly Black poor, working-, and middle-class residents and neighbors). Venturing beyond the residential block would lead other elements of this climate, to include sometimes-hostile-sometimes-benign employers, landlords, banks, city officials, and other city dwellers (Baldwin 2007; Connolly 2014; Hirsch 1983; Wilkerson 2010). Preparation for the “weather” would have been an ongoing, daily orientation of body, mind, and spirit but would not have been all-encompassing or wholly determinative of action, interaction, thought, or emotion, quotidian as it was. Even as the natural weather is not to be changed but dealt with, braved, avoided, or caught off guard by, so the elements of the urban environment would be engaged by Black urban dwellers. Alternative knowledges and environmental interaction yielded possibilities through limitation for historical Black urban subjects that, while not always liberatory, enabled the day-to-day to continue unfolding in the face of a sometimes-gloomy forecast. Attention to the Black spatial affordances of historical environments opens up opportunities to further serious inquiry into the range of practices Black people devised for whatever the weather threw their way.

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NOTES

1. Other ethnic enclaves, to include Dutch, Italian, and Chinese migrants and dwellers, were also pinpointed spatially in Burgess's model, but none of those groups crossed into other settlement zones on the chart. These groups would be studied as racial "types" by another member of the Chicago School, Louis Wirth (1964).

2. *The Philadelphia Negro* (Du Bois [1899] 2007), although not heralded by other early field-shaping sociologists or by the discipline at large until more recently, established a groundwork for study of the particularities of Black urban experiences and the active race-based exclusion present in the city environment at the turn of the century (Ferguson 2004; Loughran 2015). Had early scholars taken seriously Du Bois's pathbreaking work, the model of natural ecological succession employed by Chicago School sociologists may have been more critical of the supposed naturalness of factors in neighborhood settlement and change that they were suggesting (Loughran 2015).

3. Scholars Shaun Gabbidon (1999) and Earl Wright II (2016) have made the case that Du Bois's work and research initiatives at Atlanta University (1897–1913) constituted the first American school of sociology.

4. *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Riot* (Chicago Commission on Race Relations 1922) was an extensive sociological study conducted by the Chicago Commission on Race Relations following the race riots of July 1919 sparked by the stoning of Black teen Eugene Williams by white beachgoers when he floated into the "white section" of the 29th Street Beach on Lake Michigan.

5. Charisse Burden-Stelly, for example, has distinguished "modern U.S. racial capitalism" in part by its "legitimating architecture" of antiblackness and antiradicalism, which renders both the Black working class and Black anticapitalists vulnerable because they are perceived as dangerous to American ideals (2020: 5; see also 2017).

6. See also the *Louisiana Slave Conspiracies* cartographic digital archive (lsc.berkeley.edu).

7. Arnold Hirsch meticulously traces the conjunctures of economic, institutional, and racial power in the establishment of Chicago's highly segregated neighborhoods. He argues that a vast range of actors colluded to violently and subtly exclude Black people from claiming and inhabiting residential space in many areas of Chicago in the immediate post-World War II era. Instead, a second ghetto was created in the form of so-called urban renewal, slum clearance, and the strategic placement and racial restrictions for housing projects (Hirsch 1983). Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor incisively analyzes the period overlapping Hirsch's, moving out of the era of public housing's novel entrenchment as predominantly Black and into the 1960s and 1970s era of expanded Black homeownership. For many, this increased access to the hallmark of the American dream was a result of what Taylor calls "predatory inclusion," wherein agents of the lending and real estate industry preyed on and capitalized on the under-resourced Black urban populace that had been discriminatorily shut out of homebuying under the government-subsidized mortgage programs that enabled white Americans access to homes in the growing suburbs (Lipsitz 2011; Rothstein 2017; Taylor 2019).

8. Bridging the artistic realm and the social scientific one, Drake and Cayton invited writer Richard Wright to pen the introduction. His own work ([1940] 2008, 1941), written in the literary tradition of naturalism (as is Ann Petry's), portrays characters as direct products of their environments (in this case racist, oppressive urban environments with limited social, economic, political, and educational opportunities), who constantly react from natural, base-level instinct to external factors rather than displaying a developed locus of self-control. His inclusion and perspective in Drake and Cayton's volume on Chicago's Black mecca displays the variety of positions taken to represent Black people's individual and collective urban experiences as well as the utility of employing cross-disciplinary and multi-format analyses to engage the subject matter.

9. Despite these structural limitations, writers and scholars have shown time and again that Black city dwellers never ceased to dream up others possibilities and worlds. See especially, Brooks (1945), Ducre (2018), and Hartman (2019).

10. Isabel Wilkerson described the Black Belts of northern cities during the Great Migration as "the original colored quarters—the abandoned and identifiable no-man's-lands that came into being when
the least-paid people were forced to pay the highest rents for the most dilapidated housing owned by absentee landlords trying to wring the most money out of a place nobody cared about” (2010: 270–271).

11. Intervening in a school of thought in ecological psychology that held that animals had limited agency and only responded to environmental stimuli, Gibson’s theory of affordances offered an approach that reconstituted understandings of environment, behavior, perception, and interactions among them. Within Gibson’s field, scholars have used the foundation of affordance theory to understand subject agency—animal and human—more broadly. One group holds that environmental possibilities can be perceived by subjects and, because of this, the environment may be capable of not only affording behavior or action, but also inviting it. See Withagen et al. (2012).

12. Opportunities for action and performance could include anything from the size, amount, and perception of physical space to the material state of a built environment. The actions or performances might range from meditation/thought/plan for action to moving through space physically with one’s body to conducting professional, personal, or domestic tasks. Performance might also refer to the effectiveness with which a subject is able to conduct a task or action. Explicitly could be by way of law, sign, symbol, document, or speech. Implicitly includes customary practice, unwritten law, and non-reference to race but skewed inclusion toward a specific racial group to the total or near-total (e.g., tokenism) exclusion of others. (In our globalized society, where Western modernity has exported its constructs of race and racial hierarchy, there are not spaces that are untouched by race. For my purposes here, I am focusing on spaces with racial segregation as an organizing principle.)

13. This positions Black spatial affordances alongside Black geographies (the places forcing a perspective of struggle), a Black sense of place (a conception of the race-based struggle created and maintained in a place), and Black habitus (the disposition of incorporated and projected social expectations, such as taste, that inform social orientations and practices of Black people sharing overlapping experiences of shadowed or doubled selves) (McKittrick 2006: 6; McKittrick 2011: 949; McKittrick and Woods 2007; Young 2010: 7).

14. Contrasting with the sheer grandeur of the modern skyscraper but just as modern nonetheless, kitchenette buildings, as forms of tenement housing, firmly rendered Black inhabitants as urbanites and their sociospatial relations as modern. Moreover, unlike the muddying of racial distinction and degree of anonymity produced from the scale of the skyscraper, the intimate closeness among dwellers of low-rise kitchenettes and the geographic fixity of the Black Belt further ensconced the built environment in a hyper-racialized geography (Brown 2017).

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